TO MAKE A MONSTER: MANIPULATION AND INVENTION IN OSCAR WILDE'S THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY AND ITALO SVEVO'S SENILITÀ

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ABSTRACT

YAKOB PETERSEIL: To Make a Monster: Manipulation and Invention in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Italo Svevo's *Senilità*
(Under the direction of Federico Luisetti)

This study attempts a comparison between two very different writers on the basis of a character who appears in both of their works. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he is Lord Henry Wotton. In *Senilità*, he is Emilio Brentani. These characters represent what the Italian critic Giacomo Debenedetti saw as the domination of inner life over action. Because of this imbalance, these characters through psychological and creative manipulation convince others to become actors in their own dramas.

Additionally, this study seeks to account for Debenedetti's anxiety over reading Svevo by suggesting that the critic feared these characters because they are able through imaginative means to alter the world with impunity.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Though published within eight years of each other, Italo Svevo's *Senilità* (1898) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891), could not be more unlike stylistically. In keeping with Wilde's critical writings on the independence and autonomy of Art, *Dorian Gray* seems to revel in its 'literariness.' Nearly every critic of the novel has seemed constrained to note at certain moments how bad parts of the novel are, whether for the luridness, their improbability, or both. In fact, *Dorian Gray* often reads like a genre novel, albeit one with very serious concerns. Its literary pedigree is long on both sides: Wilde himself conceded that it is "an idea that is old in the history of literature" (Ellmann 311). It could be, according to Rodney Shewan, anything from a "a study of various Victorian art movements, a dramatisation of Ruski[n] and Pate[r]," to "a rehash of Poe, a crib from Stevenson," or a cento of half a dozen other French and English novels (112). Whatever its sources, however, it seems clear that Wilde sought in *Dorian Gray* to create a self-contained artistic world that would bear only a passing resemblance to Nature. The bad passages in *Dorian Gray* are actually those from which Nature has been most successfully expelled.

When critics write about Svevo's prose style, on the other hand, "anti-literary" is the adjective which most frequently appears (Furbank 171). P.N. Furbank considers it a testament to Svevo's originality that *Senilità* was written "in the most prosaic, laborious, pedestrian and anti-literary manner, without any of the charms and verbal subtleties of 'artist'

prose" (171). As if to further alienate it from the literary standards of the period, Svevo's prose is also frequently described as being "'business' Italian" (Furbank 172) and "'clerk-like'" (Minghelli 48). Doubtless, this judgment is at least partially swayed by Svevo's real-life involvement in the business milieus of Europe. However, "business Italian" also carries its own justification within the texts. On the one hand, it serves to distinguish Svevo's prose from the style practiced by the Italian literary establishment of the time. But "business Italian," in Furbank's estimation, also connotes a "dogged concentration on meaning and substance" (171). It places "what is said" above "how it is said." In this sense, Svevo does not so much refashion the world as reveal it.

It was part of Svevo's early debt to the French realists that "his prose fails to destroy and remold a new world in and through language" (Minghelli 48). Svevo's inability to "destroy and remold a new world" points not to a weakness, but rather to a conscious rejection by the novelist of the "safe haven" afforded by literature "from the chaos and fragmentation of modern times" (Minghelli 48). To be sure, Svevo's novels are invaded by elements both from within and without the literary tradition. As Giacomo Debenedetti noted in his pioneering essay "Svevo e Schmitz," "Svevo muta tranquillamente maniera, senza che si possano avvertire cambiamenti sostanziali dell'ispirazione" (70). In Minghelli's words, Svevo "seems to be…unable to appropriate any style or literary model without falling prey to it and becoming passively absorbed by its language" (55).

The openness to outside elements which characterizes Svevo's writing constitutes his claim to importance, writes Giuliana Minghelli.

> "I find that Svevo's contribution to the modernist project lies in the 'discovery' that such production -- of consciousness, of the work of art, of language-- while it might be described as a hermetically sealed, autonomous, solitary moment, is at the same time an

> encounter of worlds, of perspectives, of subjectivities, a sea of otherness that keeps the self afloat" (17).

In his novels, Svevo stages "an endless invasion and contamination between self and other" (Minghelli 16). From his choice of literary pseudonym -- the 'Italian Swabian' -- to the influences of German and Triestine dialect on his prose, Svevo's oeuvre is so possessed by "contamination" that purity comes to seem, after his example, like an outdated artistic ideal.

Oscar Wilde enjoyed a more ambiguous attitude towards contamination. While he resented Nature's intrusion into the "distinction, charm, beauty, and imaginative power" of Art, he nevertheless noted that a similar dynamic was at play, only in reverse (*Artist* 296). Art frequently infects Nature, Wilde observed. This was a phenomenon to be applauded, even encouraged. For Wilde, Art served to correct Nature's deficiencies and helped it achieve a perfection which it was incapable of carrying out (291). In critical works such as "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist," Wilde wrote of the seductive power Art has to give Nature "a momentary perfection" (344). As an example, he uses the case of the woman who modeled her life after the serial installments of a magazine story. Wilde tacitly acknowledged in these writings that contamination between Art and Nature is inevitable, and in certain cases even desirable.

For Svevo's most important early critic, Giacomo Debenedetti, this was a source of anxiety. The ways in which Debenedetti dealt with this phenomenon will be discussed in Chapter One. It is enough to say here that at the source of Debenedetti's anxiety, according to Minghelli, was his privileging of such nineteenth-century authors as Stendhal, Tolstoy, and Balzac. What the critic admired about these novelists was that their heroes enjoyed a "healthy unity between inner life and action" (Minghelli 52). This is precisely what disturbed him about Svevo. Svevo's characters, he noted, had a tendency to forsake action in

favor of dramatically indulging their inner lives. According to Debenedetti, Svevo's novels dissolve the "nineteenth-century aesthetic of symbolic unity," and therefore could not compete with the best efforts of the aforementioned novelists (Minghelli 51).

Through their characters, both authors acknowledged that any chance at harmony between inner life and action had become impossible. No longer evenly split between action and contemplation, the characters in their novels are devoted to the inner life. Both Emilio Brentani and Lord Henry Wotton make dangerous discoveries about this way of life. Using their powers of persuasion, they are able to affect the world around them solely through their psychological and creative ingenuity. The goal of this thesis is to highlight this character and to examine the ways in which he pursues this idiosyncratic lifestyle. In the process, I hope to shed some light on this character's significance and attempt to explain why he should provide a link between two authors who are otherwise so different.

CHAPTER II

SENILITÀ

Contamination depends on the subject's susceptibility. The ideal subject for contamination would be a 'weak' subject, whether in terms of strength, health, age, or more subtly, temperament. Emilio Brentani, the protagonist of *Senilità*, possesses qualities which place him firmly in the tradition of other Svevian protagonists like Alfonso Nitti and Zeno Cosini. The attempt to characterize these protagonists has been one of the constants in Svevian criticism, and can be summed up in the term *inetto*, or inept person, which was the title Svevo almost gave to his first novel.

It is important to note how elusive a definition of the *inetto* has proven for critics. As early as 1949, Giuliano Manacorda could write: "La definizione di questo personaggio è stata infatti la cura principale della critica sveviana che ha voluto individuarne il senso per evitare che esso ci sfugga nell'atto stesso in cui lo stiamo gustando e crediamo di comprenderlo" (213-4). Whenever we attempt to grasp him, writes Manacorda, "ci scivola via" (214). Benedetti, writing twenty years earlier, expressed a similar frustration: ". . . una eccessiva impressionabilità lo spinge a cristallizzare intorno ai più svariati nuclei che gli vengano offerti dall'esterno, anzichè ad imporre la sua forma e le sue preferenze. . . come un ciottolo fluitato da un torrente, prende via via la forma che il singolo momento gli dà" (246).

More recent critics, like Guido Baldi, have offered up a definition of the *inetto*, however, at the expense of creating what Minghelli calls an "antidote" -- that is, a strategy for limiting

the text (Minghelli, "Italo Svevo"). For Baldi, the *inetto* is characterized above all by his immaturity. In the case of Brentani, this is manifested in his simultaneous worship of and disgust with Angiolina, the object of his desires. On the one hand, notes Baldi, Emilio perpetually seeks to turn this working-class woman into a motherly figure, a fount of "dolcezza e sicurezza" (15). But his desires are constantly rebuffed by the 'real' Angiolina and never more so than when he possesses her physically and confronts the reality of her flesh (Baldi 15). Their moments of intimacy are the scene of a "dissocazione tra sesso e sentimento" which for Baldi is characteristic of a neurotic psychic structure (15).

The gap between desire and reality -- which is Baldi's greatest evidence for Emilio's immaturity -- is also manifested in the protagonist's willing self-delusion. Brentani is possessed by the desire to escape reality, and in particular to escape his own reality, "la propria inettitudine" (Baldi 26). To this end, the protagonist of*Senilit à* obsessively seeks to occlude his 'authentic' personality by creating masks for himself. Baldi lists them like a catalog: the Baudelairean albatross, the immoral and superior man, the naturalist, the Schopenhauerian pessimist, the revolutionary Marxist (31). The very banality of these poses, says Baldi, is evidence of the narrator's own bias against the protagonist, an implicit commentary on his immaturity (24).

Of course, Debenedetti covered this same ground in "Svevo e Schmitz." In addition to claiming that Svevo did not achieve the stature of Stendhal or Tolstoy because he refused to identify his protagonists as Jews (thereby denying them the representation of "quel tale momento della coscienza ebraica" (254)), the critic repeatedly referred to the *inetti* of Svevo's novels as adolescents, even babies (*bambini*) (242; 246). He wrote that they are incapable of taking life seriously. While the rest of us use our experiences to more

effectively confront the world, for the *inetti*, life remains a perpetual "indecifrabile e caotico enigma" (246). For them, experience yields no lessons about living in the world.

Baldi (and Debenedetti) seem too eager to explain away Emilio's behavior as a symptom of immaturity. Their characterizations are based on two major claims: that the *inetti* willingly refuse to confront the world on its own terms, and that they are incapable of learning from experience. Like a frustrated parent, Debenedetti writes: "Non arriva a capacitarsi che ad un certo momento la vita è incominciata; la vita sul serio, che non perdona, e dove si porta la pena dei propri sbagli" (246). It appears that the *inetti* for him are the equivalent of insubordinate children. Not only do they refuse to take life seriously (even beyond the point where "la vita sul serio" begins), they are capricious, forgetful, playful. In the same paragraph, the critic asks us to recall Zeno's scholastic career in *La Coscienza*: "basta ricordarne un particolare: non è riuscito, passando dall'una all'altra facoltà universitaria, a prendere una laurea" (246). The inability to graduate becomes for Debenedetti a symbol of the *inetto*'s frustrating refusal to engage in life.

As we have mentioned in the previous chapter, Debenedetti's reading of Svevo is firmly grounded in a "nineteenth-century aesthetic of symbolic unity," whose exemplars are Stendhal, Tolstoy, and Balzac. The critic, in his negative judgment of the *inetto*, clearly betrays his preference for the literary hero who enjoys a "healthy unity between inner life and action." The *inetti*, who dissolve and disrupt this unity, provoke the critic's ire.

Debenedetti's notions were already being challenged in the first half of the 1890s. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which will be considered in the next chapter, had already proposed a new model for selfhood and self-development, in which traditional unities were revised. Now, we realize that Svevo has more in common with Proust, Joyce, and Musil than with

Stendhal, Tolstoy, and Balzac. *A Rebours*, another novel which grew out of the realist tradition which inspired Svevo, is another example of the gradual dissolution of "symbolic unity" which is characteristic of the novels of this period.

The hero of Huysmans's most celebrated novel, Des Eissentes, is the last in his line when he decides to retire to a mansion in the Parisian suburbs. There, he undertakes a highly individualistic quest for the most extraordinary sensations available. In many ways, his pursuit of the *vita contemplativa* mirrors the same ideal which Alfonso Nitti pursues in *Una vita*, and the condition of *senilità* in which Emilio Brentani lives. Of course, Des Eissentes is responsible for carrying this way of life to extremes which Emilio and Alfonso might never have dreamed of; nevertheless, the French aristocrat is an exemplary specimen of the rupture "between inner life and action." Though, for Debenedetti, this is clearly a negative development, it is worth noting the positive qualities with which Des Eissentes manages to imbue this inherently perverted condition.

Next to all the talk about rot and decay, there is an extraordinary positive energy which runs through the novel. Though he has willingly closed himself off from the rest of the world, Des Eissentes pursues the new and the strange with the vigor of an explorer. His search for new sensations points not only to a curious and adventurous personality, but to an imagination that is versatile, even athletic, as it passes from one field of knowledge to the next. This versatility recalls not only Zeno's passage from one university curriculum to the next, but also Brentani's willingness to entertain ideas about subjects as diverse as literature, socialism, the status of women, and the plastic arts. A certain restlessness governs all of these pursuits, indicative of both an intellectual insatiability and an avowed indifference to what we have called "graduating."

Furthermore, we can add that while Des Eissentes spends most of the novel at a remove from action and human activity, he is nevertheless constantly engaged in re-imagining the world around him. Depending on what he is reading, what he is drinking, or what perfume he is inhaling, turn-of-the-century France can become decadent Rome, medieval Europe, or ancient Greece. Of course, "reality" here, or "the world," exists not as an objective phenomenon, but as a highly subjective interpretation. And perhaps it is the world conceived as such which so troubles Debenedetti. Here is how he describes the Svevian hero: "L'eroe di Svevo è generato dalla sensazione fondamentale di uno scompenso tra l'orientamento che l'individuo dà alla propria vita, e la curva che poi la vita descrive" (242). What Debenedetti refers to as a failure is the attempt to shape one's life in defiance of "reality" -- the aesthete's dream. For Debenedetti, this desire to shape reality inevitably represents an "errore di calcolo", which dooms the aesthete to suffering (242). What emerges from this analysis is Debenedetti's profound distrust of aestheticism. Not only is the movement entirely ignored in "Svevo e Schmitz," but the aestheticist qualities which the *inetti* possess are put down as childish, or even worse, as Jewish.

Debenedetti's distrust of aestheticism leads him to underestimate the character of the *inetto*. Far from being a child with the inability to put his experiences to use, the *inetto* is a sophisticated and resourceful individual who *refuses* to put his experiences to use. Like Des Eissentes with his Latin books and his perfumes, the *inetto* serially pursues experience, refusing, lest it arrest his development, to stop at any one. This is the same condition that Baldi terms "immaturity" in his study of *Senilità*, thereby revealing his own profound reservations about aestheticism.

In considering the presence of aestheticism in *Senilità*, we might ask ourselves whether the

inetto is really weak, or whether his designation as such represents another critical prejudice. On the very first page of the novel, we are told by the narrator that Emilio has "una grande paura di se stesso e della debolezza del proprio carattere, invero piuttosto sospettata che saputa per esperienza" (403). This suspicion seems to hang over the essays of Debenedetti and Baldi, as well. Both use the adjective *debole* to describe Emilio; however, without any substantial evidence to support it. Weakness seems to remain a suspicion rather than a certainty. If we turn to Minghelli's argument, we see the charge of weakness turned on its head: "The constant confrontation with other realities is not, as Debenedetti would have it, a strategy to escape life, but rather a way to experience it more fully" (54). What Baldi and Debenedetti might call a withdrawal from life based on a character's weakness becomes, in Minghelli's estimate, "his will to becoming" (54).

The *inetto*'s constant confrontation with other realities is the subject of Minghelli's study. The critic uses words like 'infection' and 'contamination' to positively reflect on the *inetto*'s propensity to locate his selfhood at the site of others. While infection -- Life infecting Art; infection by the other -- is at the root of all that is tragic in *Dorian Gray*, for the protagonists of *Senilità* and other *inetti*, infection seems to be a habit, or a norm. Contamination between the active and contemplative parts of his self, susceptibility to outside influence seem, in fact, to be lifestyle choices. It is a choice that had already been made by other literary aesthetes, such as Des Eissentes and Johannes, the protagonist of Kierkegaard's "Diary of the Seducer." Far from making them weaker, infection seems to strengthen these characters and allow them to "experience [life] more fully."

What is the nature of this infection? The primary figure under whose tutelage Emilio falls is the sculptor Stefano Balli. He is everything that Emilio is not. Proud, aggressive and

confident, he is a person of whom Debenedetti might say: the orientation he gives to his life is the curve which it then describes. As an unchanging and uncomplicated presence in the novel, he is obsessed, as Minghelli writes, with "the triumph of his subjectivity" (105). Though he has experienced little artistic success in his career, he remains unfazed.

> "S'accontentava del consenso di qualche singolo artista ritenendo che la propria originalità dovesse impedirgli il successo largo, l'approvazione delle masse, e aveva continuato a correre la sua via dietro a un certo ideale di spontaneità, a una ruvidezza voluta, a una semplicità o, come egli diceva, perspecuità d'idea…" (410)

The goal of this ideal is to liberate "il suo 'io' artistico depurato da tutto ciò ch'era idea o forma altrui" (410). Balli is a pure egotist, and for this reason, an attractive companion for Emilio. The latter freely subsumes himself to his friend. In their conversations about art, there is only one view: Balli's. Emilio even goes so far as to imitate the way his friend walks, talks, and carries himself (411). And it is at least in part an imitation of Balli's easy ways with women that Emilio takes up with Angiolina in the first place. "Perché non si sarebbe potuto divertire anche lui con le donne come faceva Stefano?" he asks himself (440).

Both men share an important characteristic: they are artists to whom artistic success has been denied. Their latent frustrations find an outlet in the realm of life, where their artistic skills are put to the test.

We learn from the narrator early on that Balli's artistic failures might very well have made him bitter or unhappy "se un successo personale inaudito non gli avesse date delle soddisfazioni ch'egli celava, anzi negava" (410). In other words, personal success -- which to Balli, consists in finding individuals to love him -- effectively makes up for artistic failure. Life becomes the scene of Balli's most extraordinary artistic success, since "per amore dell'artista le donne amavano anche l'arte sua che pure era tanto poco femminea" (411).

However, Balli is not content with the admiration of others. The creative energy which fails to find an outlet in his work turns him into the sculptor of life. Minghelli observes: "Through Angiolina and Amalia, Svevo keenly uncovers the artists' desire to transfigure, the compulsion to represent the self in the other and worship that self in the other" (105). For both Balli and Emilio, the female characters in *Senilità* represent their raw materials, to be manipulated and sculpted according to their whims.

Balli's artistry is characterized by his relentless egotism. He seeks to turn Angiolina into the embodiment of his artistic ideal. If he is at first weary of her monopolizing Emilio's attentions, he gradually becomes obsessed with her. Wallowing in an artistically fallow period, he conceives of a sculpture for which she will be the model. At their first meeting, Balli had relentlessly criticized Angiolina for the flaws he saw in her face: "Gli occhi non sono brutti -- dichiarò il Balli -- il naso però non è modellato perfettamente; la linea inferiore è poco fatta. Bisognerebbe darci ancora qualche colpo di pollice" (449). He sets about 'correcting' her profile in the only way he knows how. "Segnò sul tavolo, col dito bagnato nella birra, la curva che egli voleva, una linea grossa che sarebbe stato difficile figurarsi su un naso" (450). Ultimately, he is able to convince Angiolina to pose for him, a scene where we are first exposed to the extraordinary violence of his artistic vision.

"The scene in Balli's studio when Angiolina poses for a sculpture frames, through Emilio's eyes, the representational act that obsessively invests the woman throughout *Senilità*" (Minghelli 105). It is Balli's attempt to imprison Angiolina in his artistic "I" which immediately strikes Emilio when he enters the studio and sees the half-finished sculpture.

> "Pareva fosse sepolta nell'argilla, facesse degli sforzi immani per liberarsene. Anche la testa su cui qualche colpo di pollice aveva incavate le tempie e lisciata la fronte, appariva come un teschio coperto accuratemente di terra acciocché non gridasse"

(559).

Emilio comments that the sculpture looks nothing like her, but Balli makes the excuse that "per il momento la somiglianza non esisteva, che quando si guardava quella testa da un solo punto" (560). Meanwhile, Angiolina becomes visibly restless under the sculptor's gaze. Balli instructs her to assume a pious expression, but "piuttosto che rivolgerli piamente, ella lanciava con impertinenza gli occhi in alto. Civettava col signor Iddio" (559). Soon, her fatigue and boredom become clear, and when Balli calls a break, she too protests that the sculpture looks nothing like her. Balli responds by throwing a sheet over the work, and the men go out talking about art, leaving Angiolina feeling like "il terzo incomodo" (561).

Balli's artistic ideals perfectly mirror his personality. In Minghelli's words, he forever "seeks a strength that is self-contained and uncontaminated by the world" (105). In keeping with his estimation of his own purity, Balli continuously seeks to identify corruptibility in others. This is why he obsessively dotes on Angiolina's physical flaws at the dinner party. His own dinner date, the "pallida, pura" Margherita, whose features are likened to those of a suffering Madonna, is later subjected to suspicions that she is cheating on him (448). Blemishes, betrayals, imperfections: these are the things that Balli hopes to exorcize in his ruthless depiction of Angiolina.

Emilio, on the other hand, asserts his subjectivity in a radically different manner. For him, selfhood is a process of collaboration and appropriation, always dependent on the presence of the other. In the words of Minghelli, "Art is for Emilio a delicate collaborative project, an effort to dream symbiotically with the other" (110). Readers of Svevo's first novel might be reminded of Alfonso's collaboration with Annetta Mahler on a fashionable romantic novel. In *Senilità*, a parallel scene occurs when Angiolina asks Emilio to help her draft a letter to her

fiancé, a favor that soon evolves into a collaborative act. "Perciò penetrò in quelle frasi qualche cosa di Angiolina. Gli venivano alla penna dei grossi paroloni ed egli li lasciava correre beato di vederla estatica dall'ammirazione" (571).

"Something of Angiolina" always enters Emilio as he pursues his courtship of her. From the outset, Emilio seeks to view things from her perspective, to participate in her life as if he were a part of her. Things which offend him or cause him worry quickly lose their severity, because Emilio steadfastly regards Angiolina "pieno di compassione più che di amore" (435-6). To him, she is an essentially pure and innocent girl who has been sullied by the world around her. Much of the novel's irony turns on the fact that Angiolina behaves in a way which -- to anyone but Emilio -- would suggest that she is no innocent.

Emilio's incessant quest to convince himself of Angiolina's innocence reflects his paradoxical position in the world. On the one hand, Emilio desires to see himself as an innocent. With the first words he says to Angiolina, he attempts to absolve himself of any wrongdoings which may follow: "T'amo molto e per il tuo bene desidero ci si metta d'accordo di andare molto cauti" (403). He is an innocent at home: "sentendosi le spalle gravate di tanta reponsabilità, egli traversava la vita cauto, lasciando da parte tutti i pericoli…" (403). Even in his literary ambition, he awaits inspiration from the outside, thereby absolving him of acting in his own self-interest. Nevertheless, he is always awaiting "l'arte, di qualche cosa che doveva venirgli dal di fuori, la fortuna, il successo, come se l'età delle belle energie per lui non fosse tramontata" (404). As Minghelli observes: "If Balli molds reality, Emilio seems to be waiting for a mold from the outside, a mold that would give form and direction to his life and his art" (117).

For Emilio, Angiolina represents the mold. She is at once the key to personal and artistic

success. With her, he will be able to escape the inertia of his previous life (incarnate in his sister) and embark on a vague, passionate future. However, even in his moments of rapture, Emilio is calculating and clear-headed enough to foresee what affect the affair will have on his life. He is able to anticipate his memories in the act of creating them:

> "Amante delle immagini, egli vedeva la propria vita quale una via diritta, uniforme, traverso una quieta valle; dal punto in cui egli aveva avvicinata Angiolina la strada si torceva, deviava per un paese vario d'alberi, di fiori, di colli. Era un piccolo tratto e si ridiscendeva poi a valle, alla facile via piana e sicura, resa meno tediosa dal ricordo di quell'intervallo incantevole, colorito, fors'anche faticoso" (430).

This is what he has in mind from the beginning: not only a personal lift from the love affair, but also the artistic inspiration which will lead him to create--what? It is never clear. At one point, Emilio attempts to record his experiences in a novel, but the effort fails. The fictional embodiment of Angiolina "non ne aveva la vita, il sangue" (528). The attempt leads him to the strange perception that "quella verità che aveva voluto raccontare era meno credibile dei sogni che anni prima aveva saputi gabellare per veri" (528). Seen on the page, the affair with Angiolina assumes a bizarre, unrealistic aspect. It is only in real life that this particular artwork can be realized. Emilio wants to live the novel he can't write.

Emilio is not alone in this complex creative process. His sister, who has been left in the shadows ever since his escape from their mutual *senilità*, is equally adept. Not only does Amalia admire the way in which Angiolina has seduced Emilio, she openly admires the type of woman she is -- or appears to be. In actuality, the two women never meet. In this way, when brother and sister get together, they invent an Angiolina who has little in common with the actual woman:

> "Quando si trovava con la sorella, amava quell'immagine, l'abbelliva, vi aggiungeva tutte le qualità che gli sarebbe piaciuto di trovare in Angiolina, e quando capì che anche

Amalia collaborava a quella costruzione artificiale, ne gioì vivamente" (468). Amalia becomes a third collaborator in their love affair, eventually going so far as to alter the Angiolina that Emilio sees: "Attraverso al pensiero nobilitante di Amalia, il suo amore per Angiolina s'adornò in qualche momento di tutte le illusioni" (468). The reason this is possible is due in part to the narrative structure employed by Svevo. On the one hand, the manner in which Angiolina is depicted passively enables her manipulation at the hands of Emilio, Balli, and Amalia. While the narrator frequently describes the interiority of Emilio, Balli, and Amalia, Angiolina is excluded from this ring of omniscience. But this also serves to protect her from further manipulation. As Minghelli notes: "the inaccessibility of Angiolina's point of view creates a shadow where her subjectivity is hidden *and* protected from any manipulation…" (108-9). The narrative structure of *Senilità*, while enabling the manipulation of Angiolina to a certain degree, also underscores her ultimate escape from this aggression.

The first hint of this occurs in the scene where Balli is sculpting her. If the passages quoted above reveal the extraordinary attempts of Balli to suffocate his subject in the forcefulness of his artistic "I," they also illuminate Angiolina's quiet yet effective acts of resistance. "Piuttosto che rivolgerli piamente, ella lanciava con impertinenza gli occhi in alto" (559). She rebels against the pose. Appropriately enough, when the half-finished sculpture is unveiled for Emilio and Angiolina, only Balli can see the resemblance. In a sense, Angiolina has shrugged off his artistic ego.

Minghelli describes Angiolina's resistance to Emilio as "indifference" (119). Trying to convince himself (and her) of her virginal innocence, Emilio constantly confronts a woman who has little or no interest in playing the role he has assigned to her. She is like an

untalented Sybil Vane. "Oh, ella non sapeva fingere", Emilio thinks (439). When he tries to include her in his romantic fantasy of taking her out of the world, she responds like this: "Lo guardò…proprio per compiacergli, disse senz'alcun entusiasmo: --Oh, sarebbe magnifico!" (445).

Nevertheless, despite her indifference, Emilio's attempts to have Angiolina play a decisive, preordained role in his life do not founder. At the end of the novel, he achieves the goal he had set out for himself when he had conceived of the affair with Angiolina as a future memory that would delight him in his old age. "Anni dopo egli s'incantò ad ammirare quel periodo della sua vita, il più importante, il più luminoso. Ne visse come un vecchio del ricordo della gioventù" (620). How is it that, after all the indifference and resistance mounted by Angiolina, Emilio can tell himself in old age that she was to him exactly what he wanted her to be? A key turning-point occurs in the shadows while the two are pursuing their doomed love affair. Amalia begins talking in her sleep.

For everyone concerned, Emilio's sister is almost a non-presence. The first description of her we get is: "La signorina Amalia non era stata mai bella; lunga, secca, uncolored -- il Balli diceva ch'era nata grigia" (412). Her only role throughout most of her brother's love affair is to listen to him tell stories about Angiolina, and to assist him in building her up into a fantasy. She is a living relic of Emilio's past, and she is often the point of comparison for Emilio when he seeks to contrast his life with Angiolina with the life he lead before meeting her (440). Amalia has read the hundreds of love stories in the books that line the shelves of the Brentani home; however, she has never sought out a romantic adventure herself. On the day that Emilio tells her of his first meeting with Angiolina, Amalia becomes aware that she, along with her brother, are now closer to love than they have ever been: "…l'amore era

entrato in casa e le viveva accanto, inquieto, laborioso" (413).

Balli is largely unaware of the effect his presence has on Amalia. While the reason for his frequent visits to the Brentani home is the feeling of superiority he feels within those four walls, for Amalia, his visits help to both give birth to and sustain a romantic fantasy in which Emilio's best friend becomes her lover. It is through her dreams that the ordinarily unassuming Amalia reveals the sea-change occurring inside of her. Emilio arrives one evening to hear her talking in her sleep, passionate phrases ostensibly addressed to Balli. It stuns and embarrasses him. Significantly, at lunch the next day, he guiltily rebukes himself for not spending enough time with her.

Shortly after, Emilio decides to distance himself from Balli, in order to protect Amalia's honor. Balli instantly sees that this is a ploy to protect Angiolina. He is right, and further, his suspicions help to highlight the growing link between the two women. Even Emilio is aware of it: "Strano! Angiolina aveva parte nel destino di sorella!" he thinks (510). The most tangible link between the two women at this juncture is the curious way in which Amalia has supplemented and in some ways supplanted Angiolina in the mind of Emilio. She has become the one whose honor and innocence is threatened by the outside world, and who must be protected. On the one hand, this helps Emilio to overcome the resistance mounted by Angiolina against playing this same role for him. Amalia becomes what Angiolina refuses to be. On the other, however, it serves as a sanitizing gesture. For Emilio, foisting an imagined innocence on Amalia perpetuates "an image of his sister that is neither problematic nor menacing" (Minghelli 110). Emilio's act is far from blameless. Amalia quickly grows despondent, convinced that she has been the one responsible for driving Balli away. In some ways, this act epitomizes Emilio's behavior towards his sister in the last third

of the novel. Convinced he is acting in her interest, Emilio says and thinks things that in reality benefit no one but himself. Amalia replaces Angiolina as the screen on which Emilio may project his most selfish desires. On hiatus from Angiolina, all his creative energies become directed at his sister, whose drawn-out death takes up the last third of the novel.

Emilio discovers her one evening in a state of delirium, and though the nature of Amalia's illness is not yet clear, her brother begins obsessively to dote on the possibility of her death.

> "Oh, la morte! Era la prima volta ch'egli immaginava Amalia morta, scomparsa ed egli che allora allora aveva appreso di non amare più Angiolina, si vedeva solo, desolato dal rimpianto di non aver saputo…dedicare la propria vita a qualcuno che aveva bisogno di tutela e di sacrificio" (581).

As she sits incapacitated on the edge of the bed, she has already undergone a change in the mind of her brother. By imagining her death, Emilio has effectively killed her and left her defenseless. In his conversations with Balli and the doctor, Emilio behaves as if she no longer existed. For example, Emilio reacts indignantly to the doctor's suggestion that Amalia drink wine with seltzer water to assuage her thirst. "Ella, bere! Non sa neppure bere dell'acqua in abbondanza. Ci mette un'ora per un bicchiere d'acqua" (588). What the doctor already knows is that Amalia has taken an overdose, and would hardly be affected by alcohol. But Emilio ardently defends Amalia against the accusation, even at the risk of worsening her condition. In fact, the conception Emilio wants to promote of his sister comes at the cost of her health. Amalia must die. And further, she must die as an honorable and innocent woman, or else Emilio's conception of both her and himself may be jeopardized.

The necessary condition for Amalia's death is as aesthetic spectacle. His sister's death must be as cathartic as the second half of a tragedy. The possibilities are announced as Emilio walks through the door and into the death chamber. He realizes that "nella ricerca di

commozione era andato alla ricerca di immagini e di traslati" (604). Meanwhile, Balli, the visual artist, is busy appreciating the spectacle of a woman on her deathbed:

> "Il Balli la guardò con evidente ammirazione… Pareva la rappresentazione plastica plastica di un grido violento di dolore… S'era seduto e guardava in aria con quell'occhio da sognatore con cui cercava le idee" (607-8).

For the two men, Amalia's death is purely a narcissistic affair. It represents nothing so much as the long-awaited conclusion to their artistic projects. That Amalia herself is completely absent from this scene is evidenced by her increasing delirium. No one in the room can understand what she is trying to say. According to Minghelli, she dies "literally suffocated in the inconsistent clay of her dreams" (108). In her absence, Emilio continues to reduce her life to the moment of death. "Anche quell'interminabile notte, la più penosa che egli mai avesse vegliata e che pure poteva divenire oggetto di rimpianto, fuggiva" (609). Even before it is over, the night becomes a nostalgic memory. Time does nothing to slow the process. Amalia's life, her love for Balli, her death struggles: in the memory of Emilio, all of this fades only to be substituted by the moment of her death. Amalia's death proves the ultimate absolving gesture. Months later, Emilio can tell himself that "la sua morte sola era stata importante per lui; quella almeno l'aveva liberato dalla sua vergognosa passione" (615-6).

No longer alive to contradict him, Emilio is free to make Amalia into whatever he wants. His sister's death comes to symbolize many things for him over the course of the rest of the novel, all of which coalesce to form a final artistic symbol.

It is a monstrous hybrid. A woman possessing the body of Angiolina and the personality of Amalia appears to Emilio. She is a clear echo of the hybrid creature which had been the focus of Emilio's only published novel. Looking back, Emilio can see his life as the perfect aesthetic creation, but only because he has finally succeeded in locating his heroine. "Ella

rappresentava tutto quello di nobile ch'egli in quel periodo avesse pensato od osservato" (621). In a moment of perfect self-awareness, Emilio realizes what role the women in his life have played for him. "Sembrerebbe che metà dell'umanità esista per vivere e l'altra per essere vissuta", Emilio thinks, "Angiolina esiste forse solo acciocché io viva" (618). He would have to add Amalia to this company, too.

If we return to Debenedetti's reading of Svevo's oeuvre, it is easy to share in his discomfort. Amalia's death glares out at us from the pages of *Senilità* because it represents a violently tragic ending to a story in which so little actually happens. If we try to search the text for an explanation for Amalia's death, we cannot help but be struck by the fact that Amalia's tragedy results directly from the creative and personal anguish suffered by Emilio and Balli. More specifically, Amalia's death is a product of her neglect and manipulation at the hands of Emilio and Balli. Though much of the novel turns on Emilio's and Balli's relationships with Angiolina, the last third exhaustively details the death of Amalia at their hands.

The acts Emilio and Balli commit against *Senilità*'s female characters support the ethical revulsion Debenedetti felt for them. However, the critic's attempt to belittle and diminish them in "Svevo e Schmitz" comes to seem even more suspect after a close reading of *Senilità*. We may recall that Debenedetti's frustration with the *inetti* was predicated on two charges: that they are elusive -- 'characterless'-- and that they refuse to engage in life. The first charge describes not only their protean approach to selfhood, but also the difficulty one has in locating them. They skirt our attempts to find them and trap them in meaning.

What Debenedetti's charges point to is the *inetti*'s absence from our world. Living at a remove from the nineteenth-century world which the critic saw in the novels of Stendhal and

Balzac appears to grant an exclusive privilege to the *inetti*. They are allowed to do things others are not permitted to do. Further, they are granted a measure of immunity. Though he has been largely responsible for the death of his sister, Emilio Brentani remains unpunished at the end. He is guiltless not only to himself, but to the other characters he comes into contact with. His only weapons have been his thoughts and his words, and the only evidence of his crime lies in his memories.

If we have compared him earlier to a frustrated parent, Debenedetti now appears as a frustrated detective, who has just seen a murderer walk away scot-free. *Senilità* comes to a very real and tragic end. And yet even in its narrative structure, the novel stays mostly within the confines of Emilio's mind. Debenedetti's frustration is clear: he would like the novel to move beyond the borders of Emilio's mind and into a more familiar world, where crimes are punished. Emilio is a murderer, but *Senilità* leaves him with no blood on his hands.

What Debenedetti's anxiety amounts to is a reluctance to confront the fact that characters like Emilio dissolve traditional notions of weakness and strength. Emilio triumphs, but without lifting a finger, and hardly uttering a forceful word. Debenedetti insists that this type of withdrawal is a weakness, and yet the novel proves him wrong. Debenedetti's strident attempts to weaken, paralyze, and disarm the *inetto* are indicative of one thing: fear.

CHAPTER III

THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

> "The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 5).

According to Houston A. Baker, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* begins with contamination. An invisible border is crossed, no less present for being invisible. Already, in the opening scene, there is a foreboding of contamination in the physical details. Though the artist Basil Hallward and his friend Lord Henry Wotton remain inside, the smells of the garden reach them through the open door. This sets the stage for Basil's confession that the portrait he has just painted has become similarly contaminated. "I have put too much of myself into it," the artist admits, "I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my soul" (9).

What is the nature of this secret? It is intimately connected with the subject of the portrait: Dorian Gray, a peerlessly handsome and empty-headed young man. When the two met, Basil's attraction to him was so powerful that it quickly developed into overt idolatry. Years later, at the scene of Basil's death, Dorian will accuse him: "you met me, flattered me, and taught me to be vain of my good looks" (149-50). Basil's secret is thathis relationship with Dorian has left the artistic sphere and has spilt over into the personal. Basil becomes guilty of "excessive self-consciousness…selfish desires, and…jealous zeal in keeping Dorian from others" (Baker 353). If Dorian, by virtue of his personal beauty, is a symbol of the artistic ideal, then the consequences of Basil's idolatry are dire. The consequence of this invasion of

the personal into the artistic is "the corruption of an artistic ideal" (Baker 353).

In "The Decay of Lying," Wilde had written: "The only beautiful things, as somebody once said, are the things that do not concern us" (*Artist* 299). This sentence appears in the midst of Vivian's tirade against the contemporary authors who fill their novels with facts, not fancy. For Wilde, nothing could be more onerous. "…[A]s for Life, she is the solvent that breaks up Art, the enemy that lays waste her house…two touches of Nature will destroy any work of Art" (300-1). Wilde expresses this belief in fictional form in the first chapter of *Dorian Gray*. The first element is the setting: Basil's open-door studio, where according to Rodney Shewan, "[a]rt and nature lie together…with incestuous freedom" (119). Inside the studio, Basil describes his first meeting with his new model: "Something seemed to tell me that I was on the verge of a terrible crisis in my life" (10). The crisis is that by painting Dorian Gray, Basil enacts the incestuous coupling of Art and Life. In the words of Baker, "the artist's meeting with Dorian was…a critical test of his artistic beliefs, and it was a test that he failed" (354). The long-term result of Basil's idolatry is the gradual ravaging of the portrait he has painted. But the more immediate, and perhaps more dangerous result, is that "Dorian is flattered into vanity and made vulnerable to the advances of Lord Henry Wotton" (Baker 353).

Lord Henry is, like Emilio Brentani, a hypocrite. He lives a humdrum life, completely at odds with the philosophy of life he espouses in his speeches to his friends. He claims to deplore marriage and convention, yet in real life, is conventional and married. Despite his caustic wit, Basil is completely right when he tells him: "You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose" (8). Henry's pose is a highly effective means for reordering reality. The central weapons in his arsenal are the sparkling

aphorisms that litter the text. "You cut life to pieces with your epigrams," Dorian tells him (95). Henry's power over the world is predicated on his way with words.

It is with words that Henry first seduces Dorian during the scene in Basil's studio. Henry is immediately intrigued by Dorian's youth and beauty, but even more so by the way he seems to have "kept himself unspotted from the world" (19). Spotting him in an artist's studio, Henry seems to regard him as the painter would a blank canvas propped against the wall. Appropriately, his first extended speech to Dorian concerns the dangers of influence and the responsibility everyone has towards self-development. The first is disingenuous, but the second is precisely what Henry pursues throughout the course of the novel. Unlike the ideal of self-realization advocated by Wilde in "The Soul of Man under Socialism," in which a select few are praised for their ability to "isolate [themselves], to keep [themselves] out of the clamorous reach of others…and so to realise the perfection of what was in [them]," Lord Henry aims for self-development not just through contact with others, but literally *through* them (*Artist* 255). For him, self-development is a collaborative act. Like Emilio Brentani in *Senilità*, Henry aims to live life to its fullest, not merely with his own life, but with others'.

His effect on Dorian is immediate. Dorian becomes "dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him" (21). In a matter of moments, Henry has succeeded where Emilio Brentani failed. Henry is so successful at inculcating Dorian with "entirely fresh influences" that Dorian thinks that "they seemed…to have come really from himself" (21). To Dorian, the entire drama seems to have originated from within.

Like Emilio, Henry derives a peculiar pleasure from influencing others. Henry derives his pleasure both from engaging in an interpretive act and playing the role of muse to Dorian. On the one hand, "[t]alking to [Dorian] was like playing upon an exquisite violin. He

answered to every touch and thrill of the bow…" (37). Here, clearly there is the theme of manipulation, of wringing from his instrument the desired effects. But Henry also wants to play the muse to Dorian, to "dominate him" as Dorian dominates Basil (38). But Henry is a malevolent muse, more interested in controlling than inspiring. To Henry, the aim of their relationship is unabashedly selfish. He seeks only one thing: self-development. According to Philip K. Cohen, for Henry, self-development involves the "deliberate fragmentation of self…between participation in life and observation of that involvement as though it were art" (138).

The division of self which Cohen identifies in Lord Henry and Dorian has clear affinities with Nietszche's theory of masks. Early in his career, according to Gianni Vattimo, Nietszche posited that decadent man was prone to making masks out of fear, weakness, and insecurity in his own decision-making powers (18-9). But he afterwards refined this position. It was no longer chiefly out of fear and insecurity that man creates masks for himself, but out of a fundamental non-unity in his nature. Making masks, according to Nietzsche, reflects the fundamental duplicity of being (27).

This duplicity is represented in Wilde in his division of the human personality into active and contemplative halves. This is analogous to Debenedetti's division in "Svevo e Schmitz" between inner life and action. In the critical writings, at least, Wilde is a passionate advocate for the contemplative half. In "The Critic As Artist," Wilde goes to extremes to defend "the importance of doing nothing," but *Dorian Gray* represents a more tempered version of this argument (*Artist* 340). Contemplation, says Wilde in "The Critic As Artist," is a form of criticism, which Wilde regards as the highest art:

> "It seems to me that with the development of the critical spirit we shall be able to

> realize, not merely our own lives, but the collective life of the race, and so to make ourselves absolutely modern, in the true meaning of the word modernity" (382).

Criticism, and hence contemplation, is a key tool in man's quest for self-development: "the life that has for its aim not *doing* but *being*, and not *being* merely, but *becoming*" (*Artist* 384). Throughout the novel, Henry seeks to realize this aim. To this end, he indulges his contemplative half, but never to the point where it would completely eclipse his active half. This would be fatal. It is with thoughts and words that Henry transgresses, never with actions.

Henry's ability to indulge his immoral tendencies with impunity is his defining characteristic. It is while expressing his opinions on marriage that Henry reveals his secret:

> "…there are certain temperaments that marriage makes more complex. They retain their egotism, and add to it many other egos. They are forced to have more than one life. They become more highly organized, and to be highly organized is, I should fancy, the object of man's existence" (72).

Henry alone among the main characters is organized enough to sustain this way of life. Basil errs in allowing his personal feelings to effect his art. This is the initial blunder that sets the novel in motion. Dorian makes a similar mistake, only in reverse. Dorian's mistake is to let Art dominate him to the exclusion of Life.

From this perspective, the most notable episode in *Dorian Gray* is Dorian's doomed courtship of Sybil Vane. It at once reveals the nature of Dorian's transgression and the cunning ways in which Henry eludes Dorian's fate. It also provides us with some of the defining moments of their relationship. Dorian's aim in pursuing Sybil Vane is simple: if Henry is content with merely expressing transgressive ideas, Dorian speaks of "putting [Henry's aphorisms] into practice" (47). The relationship with Sybil Vane is Dorian's attempt to give a physical reality to "mere words" -- Henry's words.

When he asks Dorian about her, Henry quickly realizes that it is not the actress's personality that captivates Dorian, nor even her looks. In fact, Dorian knows little or nothing about the girl he supposedly loves. However, he is able to provide vivid details about her acting: "Tonight she is Imogen…and tomorrow night she will be Juliet," he swoons (54). Henry instantly perceives that it is Sybil's status as a quasi-fictional character that captivates Dorian. As he begins to confide the feelings Sybil inspires in him, Henry abruptly sees the potential in the affair. He is loathe to advise Dorian against pursuing Sybil Vane because for Henry there is more at stake than the young man's happiness. What Dorian is pursuing in Sybil Vane is nothing less than the total eclipse of Life by Art. By the peculiar dynamic of their relationship, as Dorian pursues this goal, so does Henry. However, unlike Dorian, Henry possesses immunity, not to mention a curiosity which is perhaps even more voracious than his friend's.

Dorian's interest in Sybil Vane goes beyond her ability to transform herself at every performance, but not by much. Dorian boasts of their relationship to Basil: "I have had the arms of Rosalind around me, and kissed Juliet on the mouth… I left her in the forest of Arden, I shall find her in an orchard in Verona" (74). Dorian is also transformed in her presence, from real person into dramatic character. Beside Sybil Vane, he is a perpetual leading man, and his future with the actress seems to promise an eternal involvement in a long-running play. But too early, the pageant collapses, and Dorian sees his aesthetic dream ruined. On the night that Basil and Henry come to see her perform, Sybil Vane is dreadful. When he comes backstage after the show, a breathless Sybil Vane offers the following explanation:

> "To-night, for the first time in my life, I saw through the hollowness, the sham, the

> silliness of the empty pageant in which I had always played… You had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection. You had made me understand what love really is… You are more to me than all art can ever be" (84).

If Sybil Vane represented the absolute triumph of Art over Nature for Dorian, then Dorian represented exactly the opposite for her. He represented the artificiality, the "sham" of art. Dramatically disappointed, Dorian promptly drops her, and is startled the next morning to learn of her suicide.

Once again, it is Henry who pushes the remorseful young man in the improper direction. He convinces him that Sybil Vane died in a manner that is consistent only with aesthetic spectacles. Sybil Vane, Henry convinces him, was less real than the roles she played. "I wish that I had ever had such an experience," he tells him, "It would have made me in love with love for the rest of my life" (98). The speeches he makes to Dorian are simply more words. Behind them, there is always Henry's insatiable hunger for new sensations. They are highly effective. His words animate Dorian, tear him down and create him anew. "'You have explained me to myself, Harry,' [Dorian] murmured, with something of a sigh of relief" (100).

It is during Dorian's affair with Sybil Vane that Henry makes a full confession about the nature of his interest in Dorian. And it is here that we must look for the key to their relationship. First admitting that he has always been "enthralled by" the scientific method, Henry echoes Emilio's realization in *Senilità* that Angiolina is nothing more nor less than his own invention (56-7). Clearly, the youth was inchoate before Henry came along. Like a life-size balloon, Henry filled Dorian with air. But at the same time, Henry realizes that his creation bears a critical flaw: Dorian has been made "premature" (57). But what seems like a flaw turns out to have been Henry's intention all along. Dorian is not supposed, like others,

to have the secrets of life gradually revealed to him. He would have been worthless to Henry in this way. Henry's purpose from the beginning has been to inculcate Dorian with the secrets of life before Dorian can conceivably understand them. In this way, Dorian makes all the choices Henry merely talks of making. Dorian lives the life that Henry dreams of living. Henry is committed to watching Dorian's drama unfold as if he were a fictional character, or a test subject, or a surrogate self.

Naturally, this drama must have a tragic end. Dorian murders Basil for having created the imbalance which initiated the entire plot. Basil, like Dorian, was not organized enough to maintain the harmony between his active and contemplative halves. He allowed Life to contaminate Art, and the result of this is the destruction not only of the artwork but of the artist himself.

"The only hope for art is the destruction of the corrupted ideal" (Baker 354). From the beginning, Dorian has represented this ideal, and it is fitting that Basil's painting is healed just as Dorian dies. With this turn of events, harmony is restored, and the imbalances provoked by these two characters corrected.

In the aftermath, we find Henry. In him, as in Emilio Brentani, the contemplative half has become swollen. He is slavishly devoted to the inner life. However, Henry triumphs through superior organization. Part of this organization consists in delegating to Dorian Gray the duty of living. This is analogous to Emilio's desire to have Angiolina, and then Amalia, play certain roles for him in his life. Both characters project their own desires onto others, and shape others according to these desires. Because he has someone else do his living for him, Henry is able to sustain a lifestyle of wickedness without incurring any of the consequences.

Part of Henry's motivation for manipulating Dorian is purely academic. He is interested,

as Wilde was, in seeing what happens when Pater's New Hedonism was put into practice. To this end, he employs Dorian as the test-subject for his philosophy. Richard Ellmann states: "Lord Henry is forever quoting, or misquoting, without acknowledgment, from Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. Plagiarism is the worst of his crimes. He brazenly takes over the best-known passages" (317). The presence of Pater gives *Dorian Gray* an air of philosophical import.

However, there are less schematic concerns raised by *Dorian Gray*. Central among these is the discomfort elicited by Henry's survival. Henry leaves an even greater trail of wreckage in his wake: two dead bodies and a slew of ruined lives. And yet, like Emilio, he appears to be immune to both punishment and guilt at the end. Henry ruthlessly appropriated another person's life, goading him on to excesses and ultimately death, and for all this, he merely fades into the background as *Dorian Gray* ends. It is perhaps inevitable that a critic of Wilde's should respond to Lord Henry Wotton in the same manner as Debenedetti responded to the *inetti* of Italo Svevo. Philip K. Cohen, in *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde*, presents an argument that will by now sound familiar. He writes of "Lord Henry's timidity and abysmal lack of awareness" (140). "Poor Henry exists -- and merely exists -- at several removes from actuality" (141). Cohen demonstrates the same determination as Debenedetti towards weakening and disarming this character. The effect is much the same. The more stridently he condemns Harry, the stronger Henry becomes.

We can understand his anxiety. Though it was Basil who with his idolatry initiated the events of *Dorian Gray*, it is Henry who exercises the most powerful influence over the characters in the novel. Henry is responsible for most of the events of the book, though he never lifts a finger. Once again, it is alarming to confront a character who so radically

revises our notions of weakness and strength. Like Emilio Brentani, Henry is removed from our world, and yet at the same time able to affect it significantly, and without punishment. Wilde, like Svevo, brings us face to face with this type, and unnerves us by letting him survive, even thrive.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

We have spoken of Wilde's implacable aversion to realism. It is what gives *Dorian Gray* its fairy tale-like quality. Though Wilde was in some ways a provocative advocate for contamination (especially when it came to Art infecting Life), his unwillingness to support this dynamic in reverse gives *Dorian Gray* an impact very different from what is achieved by Svevo in *Senilità*.

Through the character of Dorian Gray, Wilde convincingly presents the case against aestheticism. Dorian's fervent pursuit of sensation leaves no room for conscience. Ultimately, it is his inability to do good which leads him to turn the knife on himself. With Basil Hallward, Wilde convincingly makes the opposite argument. The painter overindulges conscience, and ends up ruining his art. In Wilde's worldview, neither too much Art nor too much Nature is desirable. In Henry, he has his most interesting character, an introvert who through manipulative power is able to maintain an artificial balance, and subsequently lead the most powerful existence in the novel. However, Wilde's privileging of artificiality and fancy in his fiction ultimately dilutes the effectiveness of his most interesting character. There is little reality to *Dorian Gray*, and consequently, there is little reality to Henry. This ultimately undermines his fearsomeness, and he remains a wit, not a threat.

The effect of *Senilità* is more potent. The power of Svevo's novel lies in his refusal to treat literature as an artistic safe haven. The French realists were among Svevo's principal

influences, and all of his novels boast their often plodding faithfulness to life. By placing Emilio Brentani and Stefano Balli in this context, Svevo achieves something that Wilde does not. He creates two characters who are convincingly, frighteningly real. The setting of *Senilità* is the same staid, work-obsessed city which serves as the background for all of Svevo's novels (Trieste). By placing these two aesthetes against the dullest background possible, Svevo makes them more credible, more likely to inhabit any city across the world.

"Dangerous" is the best description for these characters. *Dorian Gray*, but especially *Senilità*, are infused with danger. It was one of Debenedetti's great insights in "Svevo e Schmitz" to sense this. We can see now that at the root of his anxiety was Debenedetti's horror at the ways these characters could affect our world. This was the source of his ambivalence in "Svevo e Schmitz." With little effort, Emilio is the terrorist in Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. For Debenedetti, a more convenient point of reference might have been the 'man just like the others' who appears at the end of Svevo's third and final novel, *La coscienza di Zeno*.

After undergoing psychological treatment, Zeno Cosini, a Triestine businessman, experiences an apocalyptic vision of the end of the world. His fears are predicated on a man with *gli ordini*. Once, he explains, man had to count on his physical strength. But more and more strength is proving irrelevant with the advent of devices. And the latest devices are so powerful that they don't rely on man's strength at all. Zeno sees in a vision that the end of the world will come when a man with a device more powerful than the others will carry it to the center of the Earth and blow himself up with it.

Brentani and Henry are the man with the device. Their power over the world is no longer predicated on their physical strength. Like the man with the device, they can alter the world

with their minds. Which begs the question: what became of the healthy duplicity of Julian Sorel? The perfect balance between action and contemplation which Debenedetti pined for in his reading of Svevo? Both Svevo and Wilde recognized that the modern world had swelled or otherwise distorted these two halves. With the belief that reality is a pageant comes the confidence to change reality.

What these two characters embody is the waning of traditional dichotomies. They are a new distorted human being against whom traditional measures are useless. This is what accounted for Debenedetti's uneasiness, and what makes his study so relevant to modern readers. He appeared to see how our world might be harmed by such a figure.

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